Marx Meets Muir: Toward a Synthesis of the Progressive Political and Ecological Visions

Frances Moore Lappé and J. Baird Callicott

Growing up in the South during the fifties, we both found a refuge from the pervasive racism and fundamentalism of the Bible Belt in the Unitarian "Liberal Religious Youth." When we reconnected romantically after twenty-five years, our friends' reactions came as a surprise: "Frankie, he's an environmental ethicist? What does he believe—that *trees* have rights?" And "Baird, she's the co-author of *Food First*? What does she want—us to end up with standing room only on her too-small planet?"

Reflecting on these reactions, we realized that from common social, regional, and intellectual roots, we had come to inhabit two distinct communities of thought—the progressive political and the ecological—often in opposition. Yet we sensed, intuitively, that these two seemingly disparate worldviews share certain underlying values that suggest the possibility of mutual enrichment.

But before exploring the possible convergences, let us sketch some of the more obvious conflicts.

The knee-jerk response of some progressive political types to the ecological vision is that environmental amenities—pure air and water, landscaped green belts, plenty of park land and wilderness—are luxury items for well-heeled yuppies. State and federal tax revenues spent for unproductive real estate means less money for entitlements and social programs. If you're Black, jobless, and hungry, the self-righteous concern of the comfortable white middle and upper classes for environmental quality seems to be one more statement of their insensitivity and selfishness in the face of others' suffering.

The excessive concern for nonhuman life—save the whales, the wolf, the eagle, the rain forests—is seen as a case of misplaced morality. If so-called civilized, democratic societies are engaged in the systematic exploitation and brutalization of people abroad while turning a blind eye to gnawing poverty, un- and underemployment, illiteracy, homelessness, and hunger within their own borders, isn't moral concern for nonhuman life just a little premature?

On the other hand, the environmentalists and deep ecologists are equally critical of the progressive political vision. Although we already are dangerously near the physical and biological limits to growth, the environmentalists point out, few political progressives advocate substantially reducing the material well-being of people living at the economic median in Western-style industrial countries. The progressives lack biological literacy: They see nature not as a living, functioning system, sensitive at many points to disruption, but as an inexhaustible emporium and as a mere stage upon which political struggles are acted out. Nature enters the debate of political visionaries only as a source of wealth-producing raw material—as contested terrain between the peasants or workers deprived of its potential fruits and the wealthy elite now in control. Similarly, human beings are often reduced by progressives to narrow economic profiles, represented as producers or consumers of goods and services. Indeed, political progressives feel queasy about ascribing to people anything other than material needs, fearing that doing so might entail religious or metaphysical assumptions—dismissed as intellectually "fuzzy" and/or divisive.

From the ecological point of view, human happiness is stunted and incomplete if defined in purely economic terms—whether in the more radical terms of class consciousness and struggle or in "value neutral" economic terms of autonomous wants and preference satisfaction. Moreover, nature is not something to be exploited: It is the wider community to which human society is related as part to whole and as the living matrix which nurtures as well as supports human existence.

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Yet beneath the very real differences of philosophy, temperament, and outlook in the progressive political and ecological visions lie several basic, shared attitudes and values.

Frances Moore Lappé wrote Diet for a Small Planet *and co-founded the San Francisco-based Institute for Food and Development Policy. Her most recent book is* World Hunger: Twelve Myths, *co-authored by Joseph Collins. J. Baird Callicott, professor of philosophy and natural resources at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, is the author of numerous articles in environmental philosophy and ethics and editor of* Companion to a Sand County Almanac (*University of Wisconsin Press, 1987*).

provisional accommodations, and the issues went underground. Race issues are bursting out with a vengeance now—in Howard Beach; college race skirmishes; the Goetz case; college anti-Asian quotas; the acquittal of a white Detroit worker who killed a Chinese coworker, believing him to be Japanese. Indeed, the issues of race and empire fuse now in anti-immigration hysteria; the U. S. can panic over Hispanic hordes, but geography is not going to go away. The issue of the limits of U. S. power is as live as ever. Cold War imagery drapes over Central America, obscuring real peasants, real torture, real death. The Bomb, one of the first issues to surface in the sixties before it was driven underground by the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, is very much with us. The spurious innocence of the Vietnam war's "electronic battlefield" returns in the form of the vastly more costly and dangerous Star Wars.

The visions of the sixties cannot be recycled as visions for the eighties, but they may remind us that where there is no vision, the prospects for serious politics perish.

But there are new realities, new not just because forty-year-olds have commitments twenty-year-olds don't, but rather because history moves and deposits new realities: a Black urban underclass; an occupied West Bank; pandemic hard drugs in the schools; AIDS. In the tangle of issues today, we are not well served by a longing for a simpler time; the sixties were not so simple, anyway, and it was usually not so clear what to do. (Had it been quite so clear as mythology would decree, we would have been spared several hundred hours of meetings.) Rose-colored glasses will not drive away the grey. In the meantime, celebrations are due: The "Vietnam syndrome" has held back the worst in Central America; Congress, belatedly galvanized, has even half-roused itself in behalf of its prerogatives in the Iran/contra hearings. However insufficient, these are achievements. It is not a bad idea to reread the Constitution during its bicentennial year; it would also repay an hour's time to read *The Port Huron Statement* during its twenty-fifth. But the right celebration should be properly modest about the sixties, about what was *not* said, *not* grasped: economic policy, to start with; a proper policy toward schools (rather than the fantasy of an alternative to them); the inescapability of political coalitions (coalitions, indeed, being the medium of politics as paint is the medium of painters); the elusive but crucial difference between moral actions (which need to be effective) and moral gestures (which don't). There is a need for visions and a need for politics; one is not the other, but each without the other withers. The visions of the sixties cannot be recycled as visions for the eighties, but they may remind us that where there is no vision, the prospects for serious politics perish. □

News Update

Rosellen Brown

Light years late the news arrives:
They have beaten him in the street
and left him unstrung, unconscious.
They have made off with a bag of "evidence"
that might be anything, love letters,
poems,
dictionaries
in the enemy language.

I am walking along my own home street
looking into the faces of my neighbors, innocent
on their way to getting and spending.
On the other side of the world the sun comes up
every day on the evidence.
But there are only words, nothing but piles of letters
in the dictionaries,
not a single sentence. There is no path
they can follow, page upon criminal page.
There are only the broken stones, unstrung,
of language.

Rosellen Brown is the author of the novels Tender Mercies *and* Civil Wars. *This poem was inspired by her recent visits with refuseniks in the Soviet Union.*

The intellectual sources of both visions are deeply ethical. The lasting appeal of Marx, from a contemporary left-of-center political point of view, rests upon his moral outrage at the human misery and gross social injustice produced by the Industrial Revolution. John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and others who helped shape a radical ecological perspective were outraged by the heart-rending destruction of nature brought about by the same historical phenomenon.

The movements that were thus precipitated coalesced in the acute political climate of the 1960s. The same capitalist-military-industrial machine that was bombing Hanoi and the Ho Chi Minh trail, searching and destroying South Vietnam—with Black and white lower-class American youth as the cannon fodder—was also defoliating Southeast Asian rain forests, building nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons at home, and mining and polluting North American soils and waters. The broad popular environmental movement was really born at that intensely political moment in American history.

The concepts and rhetoric of resistance on behalf of the environment were appropriated from the political left and its resistance on behalf of oppressed peoples. Thus, the contemporary, post-sixties ecological vision began as an extension of the progressive political vision. In fact, ecologists extended the concept of justice beyond the human species, using the same impetus of moral outrage and the rhetoric of resistance to defend the rights of other animal species. Peter Singer's animal liberationist vision was built in part upon a sense of moral outrage at the exploitation and oppression by a powerful minority of a powerless majority—thus extending the social ideal of justice to the wider sphere of the biotic community.

Beyond these shared roots in an ethical vision, both progressive and ecological movements tend to locate individual meaning within a larger whole—human society for progressives, the "biotic community" for ecologists. In this emphasis, both conflict with the dominant liberal tradition—which has so thoroughly shaped Western political thought—and the ontological priority it assigns to individuals. Indeed, it is precisely here that liberals tend to be most outspoken in their criticism of progressives on the left—arguing that lefties tend to subordinate the interests and autonomy of individuals to the interests and authority of the social whole—a spectral menace, threatening the inherent worth, rights, and "freedom" of individuals. In parallel fashion, critics of ecological holism aver that it involves a mistaken subordination of the individual to the biota.

The progressive political and ecological understandings of freedom also contrast dramatically with the

defensive liberal notion. Classically expressed by Isaiah Berlin, liberty is "the holding off of something or someone—of others, who trespass on my field or assert their authority over me—intruders or despots of one kind or another." In the liberal's world, where we social atoms bounce about in limited space, freedom is merely what's left over after others have established their turf—"my freedom ends where your nose begins." Freedom is elbow room.

The progressive political and ecological visions share a more positive and systemic understanding of freedom—with responsibility—because they see the manifold ways in which an economic and political structure can indirectly limit or enhance freedom. How many choices, for example, do the jobless have when unemployment rates are high? Freedom cannot flourish, says the political progressive, unless it is understood to include active responsibility for developing social structures which ensure opportunity to all. Similarly, the ecological visionary who links us systemically to the entire natural world understands our responsibility not just to refrain from directly harming nature ourselves but to strive to be active "stewards," responsibly safeguarding the well-being of the biosphere.

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These central shared values present the possibility that the ecological and progressive political movements can both learn from each other's insights.

The ecological vision may offer a reinterpretation of the fundamental concepts of individuality and society which could give new life, meaning, and appeal to the progressive political tradition. Ecological science focuses attention on relationships. It reveals that or-

ganisms are not only mutually related and interdependent; they are also mutually defining. In general, species adapt to a "niche" in the biotic community, a role or profession in the "economy of nature." The fluctuations of temperature, rainfall, hours of daylight and darkness, the peculiarities of predators and prey, and hundreds of other variables all sculpt the outward and inward forms and structures of Earth's myriad of species. A species is thus "internally related" to its habitat. Its completely unique and identifying characteristics are determined by its network of relationships. It is what it is because of where and how it lives. From an ecological point of view, a species is the intersection of a multiplicity of strands in the web of life. It is not only located in its context; or related to its context, it is literally constituted by its context.

Viewing the human microcosm through the lens of ecology, a new picture of the relationship of individuals to society emerges. Rather than thinking of individuals as ontologically fundamental and society as either an emergent or an artificial abstraction, the social whole appears as the organic and enduring matrix which gives form and substance to human lives. From this point of view, the modern classical picture of a "state of nature" drawn by Thomas Hobbes, in which fully formed human beings once lived as solitaries in a "war of each against all," is patently absurd. Not only is it impossible to imagine human beings to have evolved in the absence of an intensely social environment, it is impossible to conceive of a fully formed human "person" apart from a social milieu. A person's individuality is literally constituted by the peculiar concatenation of relationships s/he bears to family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and coworkers. Even in the eighteenth century, the heyday of liberalism, our social nature was recognized by, of all people, Adam Smith: "It is thus that man, who can subsist only in society, was fitted by nature to that situation for which he was made."

Since we are ultimately interdependent, it is silly to pit individual welfare against individual welfare. And it becomes equally ridiculous to think in terms of tradeoffs between social integrity and the individual's unfettered pursuit of happiness. The health and integrity of the social whole is literally essential to a socially constituted individual's well-being. Such a vision of individuality, drawn from ecology, would free the progressive political vision from both the destructive social atomism of classic liberalism and the equally chilling reification of class interests long associated with the left.

Within the liberal tradition, freedom is a zero-sum equation—the larger is my freedom the smaller is yours, since there's only so much social space and goods to go around. But freedom is only finite when defined to mean freedom to possess that which is finite. If the concept of freedom is expanded to include our freedom to develop our unique human capacities, it becomes infinite. The ecological concept of synergy helps us understand why: If individuality is realized in large part through relationships, then how can freedom be conceived independently of these connections? It cannot.

Viewed in this way, what previously appeared to be burdensome social and environmental obligations may be seen as opportunities for personal expansion and enhancement. The "responsibility," for example, not to pollute or otherwise degrade the environment—a limitation on the negative concept of freedom in the liberal tradition—becomes something more like the opportunity to brush one's teeth or put on fresh clothes. Similarly, the "responsibility" to restructure social rules so as to end poverty—a seemingly impossible burden—becomes, on the contrary, an incredible weight lifted from our shoulders. Imagine walking through any neighborhood of any city in our country basking in the vibrant street life, with no fear of assault—either psychic or physical—by human misery and deprivation. Or, from the opposite approach, imagine the total deflection of your own energy were you to be handed a pink slip tomorrow with no hope for reemployment. Such positive and negative images might help us grasp the magnitude of human potential stolen from us by endemic poverty—and thus the incredible potential to be released by its eradication. Seeing freedom as the mutual expansion of horizons belies the whole notion of zero-sum.

If you're Black, jobless, and hungry, the self-righteous concerns of the comfortable white middle and upper classes for environmental quality seem to be one more statement of their insensitivity and selfishness in the face of others' suffering.

While political progressives may fear that the focus on nonhuman forms of life in the ecological vision might divert energy from pursuit of universal human rights, in fact the opposite may be true. The more expansive notion of the "biotic community" lying at the heart of the ecological vision might serve to minimize the divisive differences among peoples, rather than deflecting concern away from human suffering. Human cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial differences may pale when moral horizons are extended to include sympathy and protection for whales, wolves, and redwoods. The essentially integrative, symbiotic vision of ecology could

be used to further advance the progressive political agenda. If human life can survive only through mutually beneficial cooperation with other species, is it not more evidently true that the peoples of the Earth can only survive by recognizing and fostering analogous symbioses? The debilitating poverty in third world countries, for example, starves people but feeds the military—because it takes force to keep people from alleviating their hunger. We all are made less secure in the ensuing militarization of national and international life. From a purely economic point of view, where elite-dominated social structures keep people abroad too poor to be customers for our goods, we are denied needed trading partners. And poverty wages paid halfway around the world now take the jobs and undercut the standards of living in Pennsylvania or Ohio. Hence, if it is clear that escalating the chemical warfare on insects, accelerating deforestation of the moist tropics, and the monocultural erosion of arable land pose a direct threat to the human population, how much more obvious it becomes that Western neocolonial oppression and exploitation of the third world leads to an economically and spiritually exhausting social dialectic as well.

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So far we have emphasized some ways that political progressives might learn from the insights and methods of conceptualization that have flourished within the ecology movement. But there are also important insights that political progressives have to offer the ecology movement.

Consider the issue of population control. Ecologists hope for a zero rate of growth in the human population or even a negative rate of growth, to be followed by population stabilization and, later, a gradual and orderly retrenchment. Pressures on other forms of life would thus be reduced and strains on the ecosystem gradually relaxed, permitting nature to recover and human beings to reestablish a stable coexistence or even mutually beneficial symbiosis with fellow members of our biotic community.

Few political progressives would attack such a felicitous vision. But they worry that ecologists, schooled in population biology, might suggest that starvation—as in the case of deer and ducks—is simply a natural limiting device on a population which has outstripped its ecological niche. The progressives point out that a simplistic biological analysis of the human population explosion neglects what is unique about human culture and society. Sociologists and health workers teach us that when parents see their children dying from malnutrition and diseases exacerbated by it—that is, when infant death rates are high—their response is to have *more* children, not fewer. Even the relatively more enlightened approach to preventing births—wider distribution of contraceptives and the increasing use of coerced sterilization and long-term injectable contraceptives—cannot achieve the environmentalists' goal of population stabilization. Several comprehensive studies have shown that family planning programs in themselves contribute only marginally to reducing birth rates. A politically sensitive perspective is thus essential for ecologically motivated activists if they wish to realize their own agenda. For what the ecologists too often miss is that human reproductive decisions, in dramatic contrast to almost all other species, are not purely biological but are complicated by psychological, cultural, and social forces. Where society denies people (especially women) security, status, and opportunity, the family—and often the bigger the better—provides the only possibility for all three.

Seen from this perspective, the "population explosion" is not the unfortunate side effect of a basically beneficent transference of modern medicine to the third world. Rather, high birth rates in the third world today often reflect the destruction by colonialism of traditional security systems, while denying the majority of citizens any modern substitute. Increasingly robbed of their land, with few jobs in sight, having virtually no access to health care, education, or old age security, and with many of the traditional religious and communal forms no longer working to provide a framework of meaning, many third world parents see in their children's labor and later incomes the only security they can hope for, and in their family life a compensation for the growing alienation they experience in the public sphere.

Ecological types would do well to let go of simplistic biological models and look at real-world human population growth patterns. Most of the handful of third world societies which have been dramatically successful in lowering birth rates have also greatly extended economic security and opportunity, especially for women. Most provide state-aided access to food, either by guaranteeing a basic ration or by heavily subsidizing prices for basic foods or both.

There are important intersections, as well, when we consider issues concerning land use and agriculture. Both ecologists and political progressives challenge the model of industrial agriculture, characterized by monoculture, the intensive use of energy and chemical inputs, large scale, and wage labor. Gone are the days when political progressives were enamored of the large state-owned/collective model of agricultural organization, efficiently employing the latest technology to free peasants from the land. The ecologically sensitized now focus on how industrial agriculture necessarily exploits soil and water resources. The politically sensitized focus

on how industrial agriculture exploits people. The politically motivated see in large landholdings in the third world a most grotesque example of such exploitation—peasants starving while good land grows luxury export crops, enriching a few. Thus, both the ecological and political agree on the need for reform, distributing control of the land among the majority.

And what is to take the place of the deposed agricultural oligarchies?

The ecologically concerned stress the need for a sustainable agriculture, today often termed agroecology, in which the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides is minimal and sustainable production is achieved through reliance on the synergistic interaction of a variety of plants and animals. Political visionaries stress the need for those who work the land to have direct control over it. Minimal use of synthetic inputs appeals to them primarily because farmers are more independent the less they have to buy.

Yet here, too, there are important lessons for ecologists to learn from a deeper political analysis. To be sure, those experimenting with the best crop mix for reducing erosion or working on an improved design for home-made solar corn dryers recognize that misinformed government policies are an obstacle to the realization of their alternative. Certainly, wrong-headed tax, credit, or price-support policies favor capital over labor and reward growth over efficiency. But political progressives can teach ecologists that even if enlightened government policies were enacted, an agriculture benign to both people and the land would still be thwarted—until fundamental principles of capitalism itself are questioned. Let's see why.

Three essentials of capitalism undermine a benign agricultural ecology.

First is the market/commodity system's glaring omission: It simply cannot provide the information needed to protect the land and the people who farm it. The only information the market offers is price. Yet prices—to which all producers in a capitalist market must respond to stay in business—do not incorporate the true resource or human cost of production. Prices of farm commodities do not inform us, for example, that their production entails the erosion of topsoil, that now, on one-third of U.S. farmland, topsoil is being eroded faster than nature can rebuild it. Neither is drawing down of groundwater reserves registered in the market price. Because the market omits such critical information, it deludes us. The market price cannot incorporate the price to be paid by later generations for whom providing food will be more difficult on land with impoverished topsoil and depleted groundwater.

Like the prices of farm commodities, prices of farm inputs—fertilizers, pesticides, machinery—also send farmers false signals. Neither can they incorporate long-term costs or consequences. Following the market's cues, farmers will purchase manufactured inputs as long as they can estimate (hope) that market prices for their crops will be high enough to cover the input costs, plus turn a profit *this year.* The market cannot warn the farmer that his choice may be generating a dependency that will threaten his economic survival when his neighbor buys the same machine, pushing production up and commodity prices down. Neither can the market inform a farmer that his choice of certain inputs may heighten his risk of contracting our most deadly forms of cancer.

Imagine walking through any neighborhood of any city in our country basking in the vibrant street life, with no fear of assault—either psychic or physical—by human misery and deprivation.

Most simply put, farming choices guided exclusively, or even centrally, by the market will be ecologically destructive because the market is blind to costs that can't be quantified. It assumes *no* cost to nature's supplies—topsoil, natural fertility, and groundwater. It assumes less than the real cost of inputs—pesticides, herbicides, fossil fuels, and fertilizers. And it "externalizes" such costs as environmental pollution and ecological degradation.

Second, within the market system, farmland is—like washing machines or waffle irons—in one sense merely another commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace. But because the supply of land—especially good farmland—is limited, it is also a speculative commodity. People buy it as an investment. As a speculative commodity, farmland is treated as having a value of its own dissociated from the body of knowledge and skills which are a product of generations on the land. Wealth, not land wisdom, becomes the criterion for ownership. Farmland ownership becomes disconnected from the culture of agriculture.

Third, in the market economy labor is a commodity as well. And as farmland becomes increasingly the domain of the wealthy—as today many absentee investors buy up land—more and more farm work is done by workers selling their labor to landowners. In the third world, this process is far advanced. And now, for the first time in American history, most of the work on American farms is done by hired labor. But agriculture

dependent upon hired labor belies the vision of agroecology just as much as does heavy use of petrochemical inputs. Agroecology is necessarily knowledge-intensive, depending upon all the faculties of the farmer. As agroecology replaces simple monocropping with a mix of crops and animals, farmers must understand the many subtle interrelations of their chosen mix in order to enrich the soil and minimize pest damage.

Thus, agroecology depends upon a specific type of relationship of the farmer to the land. It must be enduring, for only over time can the necessary information be acquired. And the farmer must feel a personal stake in the welfare of the land, in order to call forth not just the physical exertion required but also the mental alertness needed to observe and record subtle changes and interactions over decades. Where land and labor remain mere commodities, such a relationship of the farmer to the land will be the rare exception.

It follows that agroecology and capitalist economic rules are in direct conflict. The market is an insufficient—and often misleading—guide to land use. And land and labor treated as commodities dissociate agriculture from its sustaining culture. Agroecology represents an alternative to the machine in the garden. It can, perhaps, only be realized if at the same time we banish the machine from the marketplace as well. Integrating the principles of genuine democracy and economic justice into our economic decision making, political progressives emphasize, will allow us effectively to tame the market—without throwing it out altogether.

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We have suggested here some of the ways that a creative dialogue might proceed between people committed to progressive politics and people moved by the ecological vision. The ecological vision could bring to the somewhat older political vision the exciting, integrative new paradigm now enlivening the contemporary sciences. It thus could free the progressive political vision from the well-worn structural assumptions of the liberal paradigm. By the same token, the political vision gives to the ecological vision badly needed analyses of distinctly human layers of complexity beyond human ecology—the economic and political rules that block the realization of the ecologists' own vision.

We are convinced that an allied progressive political/ecological vision could help to free both from their respective limitations. Listening to each other, both movements could become more convincing to the majority who now listen to neither. □

A Heavy Silence

Zelda

Translated from the Hebrew by Marcia Falk.

Zelda (Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky) was born in Russia in 1914 and emigrated to Palestine at the age of twelve. An Orthodox Jew from a distinguished line of Hassidic rabbis, she was educated primarily in religious girls' schools, where she later became a teacher.

Today Zelda is one of Israel's most widely read poets. Her mystical-religious, even visionary sensibility has, rather astonishingly, captivated a wide Israeli audience of mostly nonreligious readers. This poem is from the forthcoming volume The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda *translated by Marcia Falk (Jewish Publication Society), the first book-length collection of Zelda's work to appear in English translation.*

Marcia Falk's latest book of poems is This Year in Jerusalem *(State Street Press, 1986).*

Death will take the spectacular difference
between fire and water
and cast it to the abyss.

A heavy silence
will crouch like a bull
on the names
that humans gave
to the birds of the sky
and to the creatures of the field,
to the evening skies,
to the enormous distances of space,
and to things that are hidden from the eye.

A heavy silence will crouch
like a bull on all the words.
And it will be as hard for me to part
from the names of things
as from the things themselves.

O Knower of mysteries,
help me understand
what to ask for on that day.